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Synergies between gender equality and climate action

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Synergies between Gender Equality and Climate Action in Ireland

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Abstract

Gender is still a central organising factor across different sectors in Ireland which are relevant to climate change targets (transport, agriculture, skills required for transition to a carbon neutral economy). Lone parents, migrants, ethnic minorities often face less financial security and weak safety nets which in turns affects them in circumstances of stress or shocks due to storms, floods, coastal erosion. Poverty is more than a problem of income shortfalls but is also related to an inability to influence decision-making processes. The need for better coherence across various sectoral policies is required in Ireland. Gender perspectives should be integrated into climate policies and all national and related strategies (including agriculture, transport, skills development, the circular economy) with indicators to measure equitable outcomes and opportunities for both women and men.

1. Relevant country context

Gender equality in Ireland: The government of Ireland notes that for gender equality, their mission is an Ireland where all women enjoy equality with men and can achieve their full potential, while enjoying a safe and fulfilling life.¹The National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 (NSWG) was extended in 2021 and is a whole-of-government policy framework.^{2,3}

Ireland's score under the *European Institute for Gender Equality's (EIGE) Gender Equality Index*⁴ is 73 out of 100 (2023), 9th in the EU, (the EU average is 70.2). For Ireland, the indicator scores for 'money', 'work' and 'health' are relatively higher than the indicators for 'time', 'power' and 'knowledge'.⁵ While Ireland is indicated to have high gender equality in the UN Human Development Index (HDI), women in Ireland still earn less than men. However, the **gender pay gap** is decreasing – the average of 14.2% in 2016 has reduced to 9.9% in 2020 according to [Eurostat figures](#) (below the Euro Area average of 13.5% in 2021). Yet the gaps exist. This is particular relevant in discussions on energy poverty, with civil society groups calling for a gender analysis

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/f1304-gender-equality/> accessed 23/1/24

² Equality is now covered by the [Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth](#)

³ [Equality and Gender Equality](#) – under construction 23/1/24

⁴ A score of 100 would mean that a country had reached full equality between women and men. Data for Ireland's EIGE is mostly from **2021** and **2022**.

⁵ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2023/country/IE> accessed 23/1/24

of the government's energy poverty action plan. Gender disaggregated data is required for addressing energy poverty (NWC & CWI, 2023).

Ireland's equality laws protect individuals from certain kinds of discrimination, harassment, and sexual harassment. Laws promote **equal work opportunities**, for example when applying for work, while in a job, going for a promotion or getting equal pay.⁶ Ireland enacted legislation in 2022 which requires Irish organisations to report the details of their Gender Pay Gap.⁷ The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2023) noted that research they supported found evidence that women, lone parents, young people, migrants, ethnic minorities, including Travellers, and disabled persons experience significant barriers **in meeting their right to decent work**.⁸ Lower income levels indicate less financial security and weak safety nets for women or others in circumstances of stress or shocks due to climate change (storms, floods, coastal erosion) and may also contribute to a limited capacity to adapt to climate change or move location (Silchenko et al., 2003).

Ireland's ambition in relation to Climate: According to Geological Survey Ireland, the effects of climate change are most evident in the increased temperature (temperatures have risen by 0.7°C between 1890-2008 and by 0.4°C between 1980-2008). This has changed some growing seasons affecting farming and has increased the number of animals suited to warmer temperatures. An increase in the frequency and impact of storms has also been recorded. As an island nation Ireland is vulnerable to increasing sea levels with flooding in some coastal regions.⁹

According to the Environmental Protection Agency,¹⁰ national climate policy and legislation has been evolving and strengthening in recent years. Ireland has both mitigation and adaptation plans. The main policy instrument, the [Climate Action Plan \(CAP\) 2024](#), implements the [carbon budgets](#) and [sectoral emissions ceilings](#) and commits and sets out a roadmap to achieve a 51% reduction in Ireland's overall GHG emissions from 2021 to 2030, and net-zero emissions no later than 2050. These are legally-binding objectives. Ireland's provisional Greenhouse Gas Emissions report (EPA, 2023¹¹) indicates that total GHG emissions (excluding LULUCF) are estimated to have decreased by 1.9% on 2021, with a substantial decrease in residential sector emissions, combined with emissions decreases from industry and electricity generation decrease.¹² The transport sector increased. Overall reductions fell short of national and EU targets. Although agriculture decreased, the highest GHG emission

⁶ <https://www.ihrec.ie/your-rights/equality-laws-ireland/>

⁷ The first set of submissions were completed in 2022 for the Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021

⁸ [Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission/ Economic and Social Research Institute, Monitoring Decent Work in Ireland](#), (2021).

⁹ <https://www.gsi.ie/en-ie/geoscience-topics/climate-change/Pages/Effect-in-Ireland.aspx>, 1.2.24

¹⁰ EPA accessed 23/1/24

¹¹ The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) report covers 1990-2022 <https://www.epa.ie/>

¹² Ireland's first climate change assessment report is currently being published.

sectors are agriculture followed by transport, energy industries, and then residential. The EPA report does not provide social impact information.¹³

Although the CAP (2024) sets out how Ireland can accelerate the actions that are required to respond to the climate change, it mainly covers gender under International Climate Action. Here the Plan highlights that climate change impacts more on women and other marginalised groups, peoples, and communities through the exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities, including varying impacts in a just transition, and access to social and healthcare infrastructure in extreme climate events. It further specifies that Ireland has committed to provide €225 million climate finance to developing countries by 2025 with a focus on gender-sensitive and locally led climate action. The CAP does not specify or link this international focused statement with the national situation. However, the Irish Gender Focal Point has a domestic liaison function, linking discussions from the UNFCCC with relevant national policy actors. Ireland maintains an active role in gender negotiations at the UNFCCC including the enhanced Lima Programme on Gender and Gender Action Plan. A National Gender and Climate Change Focal Point has been appointed.

2. Policy debate: gender differentiated impacts of climate change in Ireland

The EU submission in 2021 to the UNFCCC indicates many gender-differentiated impacts of climate change, that are also relevant for Ireland. Using three broad themes, the sections below examines gender and climate change: (a) the actual or perceived vulnerability of individuals, groups and communities to climate change impacts; (b) Who is involved in decision-making and attitudes towards responses to climate change impacts; and (c) who benefits and loses from action on climate change.

2.1 Vulnerability, poverty

People who are socially, economically, culturally, politically, institutionally, or otherwise marginalized are especially vulnerable to climate change, and also to some adaptation and mitigation responses (IPCC, 2014). While Ireland has experienced strong and progressive (volatile) income growth over the past three decades, levels of income poverty and material deprivation have remained consistently high for certain groups. The 2023 ERSI report (Roantree and Doorley) emphasizes the challenges faced by lone parents and working-age households with no one in paid employment. Paveel Point, who work with Travellers, highlight their travellers and Roma persons vulnerability to climate change, due to poverty and marginalisation. Income inequality, which had been decreasing, reached its lowest levels in 2020 but rose again in 2021.

¹³ In the second quarter of 2023, the economic sectors responsible for most greenhouse gas emissions were manufacturing (23.5%), households (17.9%), electricity, gas supply (15.5%), agriculture (14.3%), followed by transportation and storage (12.8%). Compared with the second quarter of 2022, emissions decreased in 6 out of 9 economic sectors. The biggest decrease was registered in 'electricity, gas supply' (-22.0%). The main sector in which emissions increased was 'transportation and storage' (+1.7%). <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20231115-1>

Incomes remained stagnant for the bottom 40% of households, and the bottom 10% experienced a real-term decline between 2020 and 2021. The 2023 ESRI report underscores the importance of tax and transfer policies in promoting inclusive growth for the poorest households highlighting child poverty.

We can infer that poverty will also affect exposure and risk to climate change, thus actions to mitigate climate change requires differentiation. Gender roles affect the constraints imposed upon and opportunities available to women and men and can affect interaction with entities outside households such as state agencies, public sectors support agencies and the private sector. Lower wages at lower income levels signals less financial security and weak safety nets for women in circumstances of stress or shocks. Tuohy (2019) mentions that in areas affected by disaster, women are in particular danger of being exposed to the effects of climate change, especially if of low socio-economic status and without equal access to information. Beyond gender and poverty, ageing population trends are an additional factor of vulnerability, with the ageing population projected to grow at a faster rate than the working-age population, which would nearly double the old-age dependency ratio by 2050. Projections of increased heat waves and overall warmer temperatures are well demonstrated to be especially dangerous for elderly populations.

2.2 Decision making

Without appropriate representation of both women and men on decision making fora and in politics, a gender bias can also be reflected in decision-making process. Regarding women in politics in Ireland, as of January 2023:

- The % of women cabinet members was 23.1% (which is 3/13 total ministers)- the global average is 22.8% of Cabinet Ministers are female.
- The percentage for women in Ireland in parliament for lower houses in 2023 was 23.1% (or 37/160) below the world average at 26.5%.
- For upper houses of senate, the percentage of women was 39% (or 23/59), above the global average at 26.1%.¹⁴

Although improving, women had traditionally been absent from decision-making processes at a political and public level. Tuohy (2019) argues that the inclusion of women when making decisions at all levels (community, local, national, regional, and international) increases human resilience and adaptation to climate change. If one group is excluded over an extended period, it is unlikely that initiatives will develop in a way that suits the excluded group (Richards. 2012). Thus, women and representatives of minority groups should be encouraged to influence legislation and participate in policy generation. However, when considering gender and climate change in Ireland, we need to consider equality of opportunity as a starting point, and equality of outcome as an ending equal. If gender concerns are not considered in climate change strategies, and subsequently implementation in Ireland, it can

¹⁴ The Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU) 2023.

unintentionally make situations worse or have differential effects across social groups. Ireland requires indicators to check policy for likely differential affects.

How political decisions at national and local authority level create a favourable environment to support gender equality and the implementation of national climate action in Ireland requires a stronger focus, including how to support equality in the transition and response to a low carbon economy. When women's capacity to act self-sufficiently is enabled, Tuohy (2019) argues, resilience is increased across the community and the community's ability to respond to the most immediate manifestations of climate change is increased.

2.3 Benefits and losses from climate change

Every climate change policy, project or initiative needs to be as effective as possible to meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement (1.5°C). Every anthropogenic GHG is connected to decisions, behaviour, choices, action or inaction of people (both women and men). Women can (and do) play a critical role in response to climate change – e.g.: ability to innovate; and they often lead sustainable practices at the household and community level. Women are consumers, producers, caretakers, and educators, hence have an important and central role to play. **Just Transition:** The Climate Action Plan (2024) expects that the transition in Ireland is fair, with national dialogue. Acknowledging that some sectors will be more impacted than other, the concept of just transition principles are embedded in the government's Action Plan and should guide the delivery across all sectors. Principles include: an evidence-based approach to plan responses; skills to participate in and benefit from the future net zero economy; shared costs so impact is equitable and existing inequalities are not exacerbated; and dialogue to ensure impacted citizens and communities are empowered.

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission,¹⁵ published a Policy Statement on a Just Transition, with 15 recommendations in April 2023. Human rights and equality should be explicitly included in the *Just Transition Commission's* mandate and embedded in the functions, expertise and diversity in its governing body and staff.¹⁶ Regarding gender, the International Labour Organisation ('ILO') guidelines are referenced which highlight environmentally sustainable economies for all, with an emphasis on international cooperation, social dialogue, labour rights, social protection and gender.¹⁷ The Terms of Reference for the *Taskforce on a Just Transition* defined the role of the *Taskforce* in 2023, and it is now established to advise the government with members from a variety of Irish agencies.¹⁸ Funds have been set aside for targeted social protection measures, retrofitting low-income homes, and agri-environmental projects.

¹⁵ independent public body mandated by Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014

¹⁶ <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2023/04/Policy-Statement-on-a-Just-Transition-Final.docx>

¹⁷ ILO, [Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all](#), (2015).

¹⁸ The Irish Farmers Association, the business sector-IBEC, the Environmental Pillar and Community and Voluntary Pillar, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the National Economic and Social Council and Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

Returning to a few key areas, gender implications are outlined below.

Transport: Encouraging walking, cycling, public transport journeys and electric vehicles are all outlined in the CAP and save tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. The [2023 Walking and Cycling Index](#)¹⁹ found that more than half of adults walk five or more days a week, while at least 15% cycle once a week, with one in two residents wishing to walk or wheel more, and approximately a third would like to cycle more. Transport Infrastructure Ireland (2020) commissioned research to understand women's travel needs. It would be interesting to note which recommendations from *Travelling in Women's Shoes* are implemented.²⁰ The National Women's Council have highlighted how transport is not gender-neutral, and that sometimes women are more car dependent due to safety concerns with public transport (NWC & CWI, 2023). Ireland has fewer female commuter cyclists than males. Cycling campaign groups have highlighted gender issues, and Carroll et. al. (2020) explored the drivers of *the gender-cycling-gap* combining census data with geospatial cycle lane data in Dublin. Females appear to be more sensitive to distance than males, thus the promotion of electric bicycles might help. The negative effects of apartments are particularly evident, and the provision of secure communal bicycle facilities in all apartment blocks may increase the female cycling share. Changing facilities in workplaces may help alleviate the issue of workplace expectations being more acute for women than men.

Agriculture: Given the export orientation, the island status, along with cultural aspects of farming, agriculture is a sensitive issue regarding carbon neutrality,²¹ even if the sector is responsible for 34.3% of GHGs emissions (2022).²² Yet, many farms are small in size and heavily reliant on direct payments.²³ The 2024 CAP mentions less chemical nitrogen and more targeted use of fertiliser, with an overall focus on improved efficiency. TEAGASC, the national research body, aims in their own Climate Action Strategy to empower farm families to accelerate their adoption of new technologies and production systems that will allow agriculture to reduce GHG by 25% by 2030 while maintaining farm profitability. Whilst Teagasc has a Gender Equality Plan, the focus is on creating a gender diverse culture and career opportunities; reshaping decision-making and governance; and integrating gender in research, teaching and funding. Although it mentions the need to develop a checklist for integrating gender in research proposals, there is no mention of female farmers, gender equality issues or just transition in agriculture. However, TEAGASC have some [investment schemes specifically for women](#).

Gender governs processes of work and distribution in agriculture, although women's contribution to agricultural and farming is often undocumented (Macken-Walsh et al., 2014) regarding tasks division in farm work. TEAGASC's website does underline some role women play (e.g. feeding animals, milking and paperwork amongst others).

¹⁹ Published in partnership with [Sustrans](#) and the [National Transport Authority](#)

²⁰ https://www.tii.ie/technical-services/research/TII-Travelling-in-a-Womans-Shoes-Report_Issue.pdf

²¹ [EPA](#) accessed 23/1/24.

²² mainly methane from livestock, and nitrous oxide due to the use of nitrogen fertiliser and manure management.

²³ Central Bank of Ireland, [Economic Letter: New Risks and Old Problems: The Uncertain Outlook for Irish Agriculture](#), (2019).

Land ownership is the key factor that establishes male domination of the title ‘farmer’ and most women enter farming through marriage. National statistics indicated that in 2020, 13.7% of farm holders in Ireland were women. Byrne et al (2013) highlight how family farming and seasonal agriculture work is heavily reliant on the unpaid and paid work of women. Indeed, women’s incomes often support loss-making farms, although as Murtagh et al. (2021) indicate farm ownership and ruralisation are changing. To move ahead with agriculture and climate targets, it is important to get all stakeholders on board and recognise women’s agency in the agriculture sector²⁴ to for example lead on EU initiatives like the Nature Restoration Law.

Skills for climate action: Only one section of Ireland’s National Skills Strategy (2025) mentions climate change as one of the global drivers of change, alongside other drivers. Reference to [Europe 2020](#) is made in terms of Europe-wide targets by country including employment, fighting poverty and social exclusion; research; climate change; energy sustainability and education. The Strategy does not have a strong gender emphasis, nor an emphasis on skills required for a low carbon economy, even though in Ireland, gender is still an organising factor around career choices. Gender is only mentioned with regard to STEM targets and the need for female participation in maths and engineering, which are lower especially at senior levels. Meanwhile the Climate Action Plan (2024) contains a focus on retrofitting, renewable energy, clean mobility, and sustainable agriculture. Gender equality in specialist skills are clearly required, if they are, as the global review from the ILO Office states, hindering the transition to a low-carbon economy.²⁵ The National Skills Strategy ideally should be in line with the National Climate Action Plan. Some jobs may be lost in coming years with the shift to a low carbon economy. There is no mention of a need to reskill or upskill the male and female workforce to capture emerging opportunities, and as outlined by the [ILO Governing Body](#) ensure a smooth transition in labour markets. For example, the skills strategy does not mention of the emerging “circular economy” model which is in the Climate Action Plan.

Consumption and the Circular Economy: Gender can be an organising factor in terms of how decisions are made about purchases. The EPA’s Circular Economy Programme (2021-2027),²⁶ does not highlight gender issues, even though there are many opportunities to include gender issues in the reduction of food waste, recycling, and the development of a bioeconomy action plan, particularly due to gender roles in how we consume and use products. UNECE has demonstrated that standards in product design can potentially affect women differently from men.²⁷ Similarly, the products themselves may have different benefits for women and for men and the societal changes resulting from a circular approach may have further differences in

²⁴ https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Key_demands_for_women_in_rural_communities.pdf

²⁵ ILO, Skills for a Greener Future, 2019.

²⁶ The World Employment and Social Outlook 2018: Greening with Jobs, 2018 estimated that 7 to 8 million new jobs could be created by 2030 in a circular economy. The circular economy seeks to increase efficiencies by maintaining the value of products, materials and resources within the economy as long as possible.

²⁷ The UNECE ran a [webinar](#) in September 2023 for European member states highlighting gender, standards and the circular economy.

impacts. A gender perspective is important for creating job opportunities for both women and men, and for making the circular economy more effective and sustainable.

3. Good practice initiatives

- The Irish Government has mechanisms in place for public consultations on climate-related issues, which allows for civil society groups to put inclusion issues on the agenda. The government established National Dialogues on Climate Action (NDCA) to facilitate and engage a wide range of stakeholders in the CAP (including women, rural communities, low-income groups, and migrants) with a programme of events centered around different themes (Climate Conversations).
- The EPA communicates climate change through its semi-annual [Climate Change Lectures Series](#), featuring technical talks and discussions on adapting to climate risks for well-being.
- The National Women's Council (NWI) has annually highlighted gender issues in pre-budget submissions, highlighting in particular energy issues for low-income and vulnerable households.
- Many civil society initiatives in Ireland are underway, including a feminist climate justice project and collaborations like Community Work Ireland's work with Pavee Point on climate justice awareness.
- EIGE contends that assuming gender neutrality in budgets can lead to suboptimal decision-making. In 2017, the Irish Department of Public Expenditure endorsed 'equality budgeting,' with a pilot programme.
- Athena Swan Awards and the Gender Equality Review underway by the Higher Education Authority are expected to inform future STEM policy.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Policy coherence is essential in Ireland across various policies and strategies. The SDGs offer a framework for addressing climate and sustainability issues, with a governmental senior officials group monitoring SDG implementation across government ministries. Effective use of the SDG framework can foster common goals between the government and civil society, enhancing collaboration for Ireland's transition to a carbon-neutral economy. Localising SDG goals is key, with examples of gender-inclusive implementation communicated by the government. Before political decisions, a sustainability analysis, including a gender analysis, should be undertaken. The Irish government could incorporate more gender-specific perspectives in decision-making. Women and minority groups should actively participate in local, national, and regional dialogues on adaptation. Consulting women on major changes, such as infrastructure, technology, and consumption decisions, is vital. Encouraging both genders in circular economy activities and green economy skills is crucial for a climate-neutral economy. State agencies like Teagasc and the EPA focus on gender equality internally but need gender analyses in outreach projects. Conducting sectoral gender analyses will ensure inclusivity and

understanding of challenges and preferences (Murray, 2019). Emphasizing climate proofing and gender budgeting in national action plans is vital. Crawley & O'Meara (2002) highlight the importance of gender budgeting for County Development Boards. Quinn (2009) calls for disaggregated budgeting to analyse impacts on different groups (women and men) and assess the promotion of gender equality. The EU's 2021 submission to the UNFCCC suggests collecting more sex-disaggregated data on climate change impacts and citizens' attitudes. Ireland still requires indicators to show equality in our move towards sustainability and a carbon neutral economy.

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